



# Debating the Precariat

## GTI Roundtable

### October 2018



The globalization, automation, and financialization of the economy have created an increasingly unequal class structure. The rise of the gig economy and unstable work arrangements have created a “precariat,” a new class that Guy Standing argues has truly revolutionary potential. Our panel discusses how new this class really is and what economic reforms and actors can stop the swell of inequality.

Copyright © 2018 by the Great Transition Initiative

A project of the [Tellus institute](#), the [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



*As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.*

# Contributions

## Opening Essay

<b>The Precariat: Today's Transformative Class?</b> by Guy Standing	1
---	---

## Roundtable

<b>Bill Fletcher Jr.</b>	15
<b>Nancy Folbre</b>	18
<b>Azfar Khan</b>	20
<b>Alexandra Köves</b>	24
<b>George Liodakis</b>	26
<b>Ronaldo Munck</b>	29
<b>William I. Robinson</b>	32
<b>Pritam Singh</b>	35
<b>Eva-Maria Swidler</b>	37
<b>Alison Tate and Evelyn Astor</b>	40

## Author's Response

<b>Response to Comments</b> by Guy Standing	44
---	----



# The Precariat: Today's Transformative Class?

Guy Standing

**Abstract:** Since 1980, the global economy has undergone a dramatic transformation, with the globalization of the labor force, the rise of automation, and—above all—the growth of Big Finance, Big Pharma, and Big Tech. The social democratic consensus of the immediate postwar years has given way to a new phase of capitalism that is leaving workers further behind and reshaping the class structure. The precariat, a mass class defined by unstable labor arrangements, lack of identity, and erosion of rights, is emerging as today's "dangerous class." As its demands cannot be met within the current system, the precariat carries transformative potential. To realize that potential, however, the precariat must awaken to its status as a class and fight for a radically changed income distribution that reclaims the commons and guarantees a livable income for all. Without transformative action, a dark political era looms.

Today, the mass class is the *precariat*, characterized by unstable labor, low and unpredictable incomes, and loss of citizenship rights.

## Introduction

We are living in a painful time of turbulent economic change. A global market system continues to take shape as the United States petulantly threatens the international order that it helped to create and from which it has gained disproportionately. This era, which began around 1980, has been dominated institutionally by American finance and ideologically by the economic orthodoxy of “neoliberalism.” A hallmark of this transformation has been the increasing redistribution of wealth upwards as rents to those owning property—physical, financial, and “intellectual.” As “rentier capitalism” has risen, working classes have foundered, as those relying on labor have been losing ground in both relative and absolute terms.

In brief, during the past forty years, the global economy has been shaped by neoliberal economics, which, accentuated by the digital revolution, has generated two linked phenomena: global rentier capitalism and a global class structure in which the precariat is the new mass class. Rentier capitalism is making the hardships borne by the precariat much worse.

Industrial capitalism produced a property-owning bourgeoisie and the proletariat; contemporary capitalism is roiling this class structure. Today, the mass class is the *precariat*, characterized by unstable labor, low and unpredictable incomes, and loss of citizenship rights. It is the new “dangerous class,” partly because its insecurities induce the bitterness, ill-health, and anger that can be the fodder of right-wing populism. But it is also dangerous in the progressive sense that many in it reject old center-left and center-right politics. They are looking for the root-and-branch change of a new “politics of paradise,” rather than a return to a “politics of laborism” that seeks amelioration within dominant institutions and power structures.

The precariat’s needs cannot be met by modest reforms to the existing social and economic system. It is the only transformative class because, intuitively, it wants to become strong enough to abolish the conditions that define its existence and, as such, abolish itself. All others want merely to improve their position in the social hierarchy. This emergent class is thus well-placed to become the agent of radical social transformation—if it can organize and become sufficiently united around a shared identity, alternative vision, and viable political agenda.

The key to understanding the precariat’s transformational position lies in the breakdown of the income distribution system of the mid-twentieth century. To succeed, a new progressive politics must offer a pathway to an ecologically sustainable system that reduces inequalities and insecurities in the context of an open, globalizing economy.

## The Rise of Rentier Capitalism

Between 1945 and 1980, the dominant socioeconomic paradigm in industrialized countries outside the Communist Bloc was social democratic, defined by the creation of welfare states and labor-based entitlements. Although there were modest falls in inequality coupled with labor-based economic security, this was no “golden age,” as some historians label it. The period was stultifying and sexist. Putting as many people as possible (mainly men) in full-time jobs under the banner of Full Employment was hardly an emancipatory vision worthy of the Enlightenment values of *Egalité*, *Liberté*, and *Solidarité*.

As the social democratic era collapsed in the 1970s, an economic model emerged now known as “neoliberalism.” Its advocates preached “free markets,” strong private property rights, financial market liberalization, free trade, commodification, privatization, and the dismantling of all institutions and mechanisms of social solidarity, which, in their view, were “rigidities” holding back the market. While the neoliberals were largely successful in implementing their program, what transpired was very different from what they had promised.

The initial outcome was financial domination. The income generated by US finance, which equaled 100% the size of the US economy in 1975, grew to 350% in 2015. Similarly, in the UK, finance went from 100% to 300% of GDP. Both countries experienced rapid deindustrialization as the strength of finance led to an overvalued exchange rate that, by making exports uncompetitive and imports cheaper, destroyed high-productivity manufacturing jobs. Financial institutions, most notably Goldman Sachs, became masters of the universe, their executives slotted into top political positions in the US and around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Finance linked up with Big Pharma and Big Tech to forge a global architecture of institutions strengthening rentier capitalism, maximizing monopolistic income from intellectual property. The pivotal moment came in 1995 with implementation of the World Trade Organization (WTO)’s Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), in which US multinational corporations helped secure the globalization of the US intellectual property rights system. This shift gave unprecedented rent-extracting capacity to multinationals and financial institutions.

Patents, copyright, protection of industrial designs, and trademarked brands have multiplied as sources of monopolistic profit. In 1994, fewer than one million patents were filed worldwide; in 2011, over two million were filed; in 2016, over three million. By then, twelve million were in force, and licensing income from patents had multiplied sevenfold. Growth was similar with other forms of intellectual property.

The rent-extracting system was enforced by over 3,000 trade and investment agreements, all entrenching property rights, topped by a mechanism (Investor-State Dispute Settlement) that empowers multinationals to sue governments for any policy

Financial institutions became masters of the universe, their executives slotted into top positions around the world.

Without transformative changes, those relying on labor will continue to lose; no amount of tinkering will do.

changes that, in their view, negatively affect their future profits. This has had a chilling effect on policy reform efforts notably those seeking to protect health and the environment.

Rentier capitalism has also been bolstered by subsidies, a financial system designed to increase private debt, privatization of public services, and a plunder of the commons. But it contains two possibly fatal flaws. First, the rentiers have been winning too much by rigging the system, raising questions about social and political sustainability. Second, the architects proved mistaken in thinking this framework would bolster the US economy, along with other advanced industrial economies to a lesser extent, at the expense of the rest of the world.

In particular, they underestimated China. When TRIPS was passed, China was inconsequential as a rentier economy. After it joined the WTO in 2001, it started to catch up fast. In 2011, China overtook the US in patent applications; by 2013, it accounted for nearly a third of global filings, well ahead of the US (22%). In 2016, it accounted for 98% of the increase over 2015, filing more than the US, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the European Patent Office *combined*.

The main outcome of rentier capitalism, exacerbated by globalization and the digital revolution, is an inexorable erosion of the income distribution system of the twentieth century—the implicit *sharing* of income between capital and labor that emerged after the Second World War, epitomized by the 1950 pact between the United Auto Workers union and General Motors known as the Treaty of Detroit. Now, all over the world, the share of income going to capital has been rising; the share going to labor, falling. Within both, the share going to forms of rent has been rising.

The social democratic consensus was based on implicit rules. When productivity rose, so did wages. When profits rose, so did wages. When employment rose, so did wages. Today, productivity and employment are rising, but wages remain stagnant or falling.

One factor depressing wages has been the growth of the global labor force, which has expanded by two billion during the past three decades, many of whom have a living standard that is a tiny fraction of what OECD workers were obtaining. Downward pressure on real wages will continue, especially as productivity can rise faster in emerging market economies and the technological revolution makes relocation of production and employment so much easier. Meanwhile, the rentiers will be protected. Antitrust legislation will not be strengthened to cut monopolistic rent-seeking, since governments will continue to protect national corporate champions.

Without transformative changes, those relying on labor will continue to lose; no amount of tinkering will do. Average real wages in OECD countries will stagnate, and social income inequalities will grow. Progressives must stop deluding themselves. Unless globalization goes into reverse, which is unlikely, trying to remedy inequality by forcing up wages, however desirable, will not do much. Raising wages substantially would merely accelerate the displacement of labor by automation.

Just as industrial capitalism ushered in a new class structure, so, too, has rentier capitalism.

## A Global Class Structure

Just as industrial capitalism ushered in a new class structure, so, too, has rentier capitalism. The emerging structure, superimposed on old structures, is topped by a *plutocracy*, made up of a small group of billionaires who wield corruptive power. Although mostly in the West, a growing proportion of plutocrats are in Asia and other emerging market economies. Under them is an elite, who serve the plutocracy's interests while making substantial rental income themselves. Together, these comprise what is colloquially known as the 1%, but, in fact, is much smaller than that.

Below them in the income spectrum is a *salariat*, a shrinking number of people with labor-based security and robust benefits, from health care to stock ownership. In the post-1945 era, economists predicted that by the end of the twentieth century, the vast majority in rich countries would be in the salariat, with growing numbers in developing countries joining them. Instead, the salariat is shrinking. It will not disappear, but its members are increasingly detached from those below them in the class spectrum, largely because they too gain more in rentier incomes than in wages. Still, their politics may be shaped by what they see happening to their sons and daughters, as well as their grandchildren.

Alongside the salariat is a smaller group of *proficians*, freelance professionals, such as software engineers, stock traders, lawyers, and medical specialists operating independently. They earn high incomes selling themselves frenetically, but risk early burnout and moral corrosion through excessive opportunism. This group will grow and are influential beyond their number, conveying an image of autonomy. But for the health of this untethered, hard-driving group—and society's—they need social structures to enforce moral codes.

Below them in income terms is the *proletariat*, the epitome of the “working class” in the European sense, the “middle class” in the American sense. In the twentieth century, welfare states, labor law, collective bargaining, trade unions, and labor and social democratic parties were built by and for this group. However, it is dwindling everywhere and has lost progressive energy and direction.

Those who pine for the proletariat should reflect on the downside of the proletarian life and what most had to do just to survive. There should be respect for what it achieved in its heyday, but nostalgia is delusional. In reality, many are falling into the emerging mass class, the *precariat*, which is also being fed by college graduates and dropouts, women, migrants, and others.

## Understanding the Precariat

The precariat consists of millions of people in every advanced industrial country and in emerging market economies as well.<sup>2</sup> It can be defined in three dimensions:



## The precariat is being forced to accept a life of unstable labor.

distinctive relations of production (patterns of labor and work), distinctive relations of distribution (sources of social income), and distinctive relations to the state (loss of citizenship rights). It is still a “class-in-the-making” in that it is internally divided by different senses of *relative deprivation* and *consciousness*. But in Europe at least, it is becoming conscious of itself as a coherent group opposed to the dominant power structure (a “class-for-itself”).

The distinctive relations of production start with the fact that the precariat is being forced to accept, and is being habituated to, a life of unstable labor, through temporary work assignments (“casualization”), agency labor, “tasking” in Internet-based “platform capitalism,” flexible scheduling, on-call and zero-hour contracts, and so on. Even more important is that those in the precariat have no occupational narrative or identity, no sense of themselves as having a career trajectory. They also learn they must do a lot of work-for-labor, work-for-the-state, and work-for-reproduction of themselves.<sup>3</sup> The need to adapt capabilities in a context of uncertainty leads to the *precariatized mind*, not knowing how best to allocate one’s time and thus being under almost constant stress.

The precariat is also the first mass class in history in which their typical level of education exceeds that required for the kind of labor they can expect to obtain. And it must work and labor outside fixed workplaces and standard labor hours as well as within them.

The precariat exists in most occupations and at most levels within corporations. For example, within the legal professions, there are elites, a squeezed salariat, and a precariat of paralegals. Similar fragmentation exists in the medical and teaching professions, with paramedics and “fractionals” (i.e., those remunerated for only a fraction of full-time). The precariat is even spreading into corporate management with a concept of “interim managers,” some of whom are well-paid proficians (depicted by George Clooney in *Up in the Air*), others of whom fall in the precariat.

Along with the rise of unstable labor, the second dimension is distinctive relations of distribution, or structures of social income.<sup>4</sup> The precariat relies mainly on money wages, which have been stagnant or falling in real terms for three decades, and which are increasingly volatile. The precariat’s income security has fallen correspondingly. Also, as many must do much unpaid work, the wage rate is lower than it appears if only paid labor time is taken into account. This trend will only intensify with the spread of “tasking” through online platforms.

Further, the precariat has been losing non-wage forms of remuneration, while the salariat and elite have been gaining them, making the growth of social income inequality greater than it appears in conventional income statistics. The precariat rarely receives paid holidays, paid medical leave, subsidized transport or

The precariat is losing cultural, civil, social, political, and economic rights.

accommodation, paid maternity leave, and so on. And it lacks the occupational benefits that came with belonging to a professional or craft guild.

The precariat has also lost entitlement to rights-based state benefits (welfare). The international trend towards means-testing and behavior-testing has hit them hard and engulfed many in regimes of workfare. Means-testing creates poverty traps, since benefits are withdrawn when earned income rises. Going from low state benefits into low-wage jobs on offer thus involves very high marginal “tax” rates, often over 80%. The precariat also faces “precarity traps”: obtaining benefits takes time, so if you succeed in obtaining them, it would be financially irrational to leave for a low-paying short-term job alternative.

The precariat has also been losing access to family and community support, as well as to commons resources and amenities, all of which have been underestimated sources of income security for low-income groups throughout the ages. For the precariat, they are just not there. Instead, many are driven to food banks and charities.

Key to the precariat’s income insecurity is *uncertainty*. Uncertainty differs from *contingency risks*, such as unemployment, maternity, and sickness, which were core focuses of welfare states. For those, one can calculate the probability of such events and develop an insurance scheme. Uncertainty cannot be insured against; it is about “unknown unknowns.” The social security part of the distribution system has also broken down, and social democrats should stop pretending it could be restored.

The precariat also suffers from an above-average cost of living. They live on the edge of unsustainable debt, knowing that one illness, accident, or mistake could render them homeless. Needing loans and credit, they pay much higher interest rates than richer folk.

The third defining dimension consists of the precariat’s distinctive relations to the state. The proletariat went from having few rights to having a rising number—cultural, civil, social, political, and economic. By contrast, the precariat is losing such rights, often not realizing so until need for their protection arises. For instance, they usually lack cultural rights because they cannot belong to communities such as occupational guilds that would give them security and identity. They lack civil rights because of the erosion of due process and inability to afford adequate defense in court; they often lose entitlement to state benefits on the whim of unaccountable bureaucrats. They lose economic rights because they cannot work in occupations they are qualified to perform.

The loss of rights goes with the most defining feature of the class: the precariat consists of *supplicants*. The original Latin meaning of precarious was “to obtain by

prayer.” That sums up what it is to be in the precariat: having to ask for favors, for help, for a break, for a discretionary judgment by some bureaucrat, agent, relative, or friend. This intensifies uncertainty. To be in the precariat, it has been said, is like running on sinking sand.

Experience of supplicant status leads to the precariat’s growing *consciousness*. Chronic insecurity induces anxiety, but as with all emerging classes, there are different forms of *relative deprivation*. The precariat is split into three factions, which has hindered its becoming a class-for-itself and is challenging for those wishing to develop and organize a progressive response.

## The precariat is split into three factions.

The first faction is the *Atavists*. They have fallen out of the proletariat, or come from old working-class families or communities whose members once depended on full-time jobs. Some are young; many are older, looking back wistfully. Their deprivation is about a lost Past, whether real or imagined. Having relatively little schooling or education in civics, history, or culture, they tend to listen to the sirens of neo-fascist populism.

They have been voting for the likes of Trump, Putin, Orban, Marine Le Pen, Farage and other Brexiteers, and the Lega in Italy. It is not correct to call them the “left behind,” since they are expected to function inside a new labor market. But they are bitter, eager to blame others for their plight. Those they demonize comprise the second faction of the precariat, the *Nostalgics*. This group is composed of migrants and minorities, who feel deprived of a Present, with nowhere to call home. For the most part, they “keep their heads down,” doing whatever they can to survive and move forward.

The third faction is best described as the *Progressives*, more educated and mainly young, although not exclusively so. Their defining sense of deprivation is loss of a Future. They went to university or college, promised by their parents and teachers that this would lead to a defining career. They emerge without that, often with debt stretching into that future. Beyond their own future, more and more despair about the planet’s ecological future.

A challenge for aspiring politicians is to build a broad policy strategy for bringing all three factions together in common cause. That is beginning to happen, so it is unnecessarily pessimistic to think a new progressive politics cannot be forged for the precariat as a whole.

## The Dangerous Class

The precariat is today’s “dangerous class,” because it is the part of the emerging class system that could carry forward social transformation. For Marxists, the term

The precariat is dangerous in the positive sense of carrying the potential to drive social transformation.

“dangerous class” is associated with the “lumpen-proletariat,” those cut off from society, reduced to crime and social illness, having no function in production other than to put fear into the proletariat. But the precariat is not a lumpen. It is wanted by global capitalism, encapsulating new norms of labor and work.

The precariat is a “dangerous class” in a different sense. In nineteenth-century England, the term was used to describe street traders, artisans, and craftsmen who identified neither with the bourgeoisie nor with the emerging proletariat. They were opposed to putting everybody in wage labor and to a doctrine of “laborism.” Today, the Progressives in the precariat also see more “jobs” as a strange answer to a strange question.

The precariat is the new dangerous class in several ways. It is a danger to itself, because chronic insecurities lead to high morbidity and self-harm, including suicides. It is also dangerous because the Atavists support neo-fascism, unwittingly threatening to return us to the dark days of the 1930s. Further, it is dangerous because the Nostalgics are, for the most part, alienated from mainstream politics, which is scarcely healthy for democracy. Although not, like Atavists, drawn to neo-fascist populism, they tend to be politically quiescent, except on occasional “days of rage” when the pressures become too great or when some policy threatens their ability to get by.

The precariat is also dangerous in the positive sense of carrying the potential to drive social transformation. The Progressives will not support neo-fascist populists. But most are not drawn to either old center-left or center-right parties, particularly social democrats. They are looking for a new politics of paradise, something inspirational to revive a vision of a future better than today or yesterday. So far, in most countries, they have not found movements to get there, but this is changing. They have already broken the mold, shown by the Occupy movement and the success of Podemos in Spain, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (MS5) in Italy, Bernie Sanders in the US, and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

The bad news is that the Atavists have been strongest so far, ushering in unsavory characters and agendas. The good news is that their size has probably peaked (the ex-proletariat are aging), while the Nostalgics and Progressives are growing relatively and absolutely, with rising numbers of migrants and graduates entering the precariat every day. And the best news of all is that the Progressives are beginning to organize politically. They can be the vanguard of a new progressive politics, if political movements and leaders emerge to embrace and articulate their combination of insecurities and aspirations.

### Transformative Policies

Historically, every progressive surge has been propelled by the demands of the emerging mass class. Today’s progressive transformation must, therefore, be oriented

Unlike the proletariat, which sought labor security, the Progressives in the precariat want a future based on existential security, with a high priority placed on ecology.

to the precariat, driven by a strategy that appeals to enough of all its factions to garner adequate strength.

Unlike the proletariat, which sought labor security, the Progressives in the precariat want a future based on existential security, with a high priority placed on ecology—environmental protection, the “landscape,” and the commons. By contrast, when confronted by a policy choice between environmental degradation and “jobs,” the proletariat, labor unions, and their political representatives have given “jobs” priority.

The precariat is a transformative class partly because, as it is not habituated to stable labor, it is less likely than the proletariat to suffer from false consciousness, a belief that the answer to insecurity is more labor, more jobs. In the twentieth century, mainstream commentators believed that putting more people into jobs and for longer was a progressive strategy—that doing so would provide social integration and offered the best route out of poverty. It was a trap into which many on the left fell.

For hundreds of years, the idea of putting everybody in jobs would have been regarded as strange and contrary to the Enlightenment. The ancient Greeks saw labor as being unworthy of the citizen. Their society was hierarchical and sexist, but their distinctions between labor and work, and between leisure (*scholē*) and recreation, are vital for defining the good life.

Being in a job is to be in a position of subordination, answering to a boss. That is not a natural human condition nor an emancipatory one. In the nineteenth century, being “in employment” was a badge of shame, often referring to a woman reduced to being a domestic servant. In the early years of the United States, wage laborers were denied the vote on the grounds that they could not be independent if they were not property owners.

A transformative politics should promote work that is not resource-depleting and encourage leisure in the ancient Greek sense of *scholē*, the pursuit of knowledge and meaning, rather than endless consumption. That points to the need to reconceptualize work, to develop a new politics of time, and to decommodify education so that it revives its original purpose of preparing young adults for citizenship. Most fundamentally, such a politics must promote a new income distribution system because the reimagining of work depends on it.

Such a system should recognize that wages will not rise much and that other sources of income will be needed to reduce inequalities and to create economic security for the precariat. The new system must recognize planetary limits and, accordingly, promote ecologically sustainable lifestyles. The distribution system must also offer the precariat a Future, one that revives Enlightenment values. A Good Society would

be one in which everybody, regardless of gender, age, race, religion, disability, and work status, has equal basic security. Basic security is a human need and a natural public good, since, unlike a typical commodity, one person's having it does not deprive others of it. Indeed, if others have security too, that should increase everyone's security, making it a superior public good.

Given that wages cannot be expected to provide the precariat with security, the system must find alternative ways of doing so. The secret lies in capturing rental income for society. We should want what Keynes predicted but which has yet to pass—"euthanasia of the rentier." One way of capturing rental income for society would be to bring the commons into policy discourse. In the neoliberal era, the commons—natural, social, civil, cultural, and intellectual—have been plundered via enclosure, commodification, privatization, and colonization. This rent-seeking is an injustice and should be reversed.

Given that wages cannot be expected to provide the precariat with security, the system must find alternative ways of doing so.

The income from using commons resources should belong to every commoner *equally*. Accordingly, the tax system should shift from earned income and consumption to taxing commercial uses of the commons, thereby helping in their preservation. Levies on income gained from using our commons should become major sources of public revenue. This means such measures as a land value tax, a wealth transfer tax, ecological taxes including a carbon tax, a water use levy, levies on income from intellectual property and on use of our personal data, a "frequent flyer levy," and levies on all income generated by use of natural resources that should belong to us as commoners.

Fed by these levies, a Commons Fund could be set up as a democratic variant of the sovereign wealth funds that exist in over sixty countries. Then, the questions would become how to use the funds in a transformative way. The Fund should be operated on proper economic lines, adhering to investment rules geared to socially beneficial forms of capital, taking into account ecological principles and tax-paying propriety.

The Fund's governance must be democratic, and it must be separated from the government of the day to minimize the possibility of manipulation by politicians before elections. And every commoner should be an equal beneficiary, their stake in the Fund being an economic right, rather than dependent on contributions, as was the case with laborist welfare schemes. Everybody, regardless of taxpaying capacity, should gain, by virtue of being commoners.

The commons has been nurtured by many generations and exists for future generations. As Edmund Burke recognized, we are "temporary custodians of our commonwealth" and have the responsibility of passing on to the next generation our commons in at least as good a condition as we found it. Thus, levies on *exhaustible* commons resources should be preserved for future generations as well as serve existing generations. To respect this principle, only revenue generated by the Fund's

The basic income is a  
core feature of a Great  
Transition future.  
Getting there is up to us.

investments should be distributed to today's commoners—you and me. This rule is applied in the world's outstanding example, the Norwegian Pension Fund Global, which, drawing from Norway's share of North Sea oil, generates a net annual return of 4% that can be disbursed to the populace.<sup>5</sup>

What is proposed here is even more transformative. The levies would be placed on all forms of commons, including *non-exhaustible* commons resources. Land, water, air, wind, and ideas are among non-exhaustible resources, and part of our commons. Some commons resources are replenishable, such as forests. Including non-exhaustible commons resources in the financing of the Fund is key to the transformative strategy. The only equitable way of disbursing proceeds from the Commons Fund is to give equal amounts to everybody deemed to be a commoner, and the easiest way would be to distribute "social dividends" or "commons dividends."

Sharing the commons is one ethical rationale for basic incomes, which are justifiable for other ethical reasons as well, including ecological justice, freedom, and basic security.<sup>6</sup> A basic income would anchor the distribution system. Granted, it is not a panacea; there would have to be supplements for those with special needs or extra costs of living, and there would still be a need for a rich array of public and social services, as well as new forms of collective agency and voice.

Still, a basic income would enhance personal and "republican" freedom (the freedom from potential domination by spouses, bosses, bureaucrats, or others), provide the precariat with basic security, and strengthen social solidarity. Evidence and theory show it would increase work, not reduce it, and tilt time use towards reproductive, resource-conserving activity rather than resource-depleting activity. The basic income is a core feature of a Great Transition future. Getting there is up to us.

## Conclusion

The precariat is becoming angrier, some supporting neo-fascism, others frustrated by lack of a progressive politics. The primary problem of the class is chronic insecurity and an associated inability to develop meaningful and ecologically sustainable lives. Unless progressives devise a transformative strategy, neo-fascist populists and their regressive agenda will continue to pose a threat to a civilized future. Promoting a new income distribution system will offer a viable and attractive alternative, which palliatives such as "job guarantees" and "tax credits" will not.

The redistribution scheme proposed here, rooted in a recovery of the commons, has the virtue of providing people with basic security, which in itself induces altruism, conviviality, tolerance, and social solidarity. And it would promote and reward ecologically desirable forms of work and leisure. That surely would be a Great Transition.



## Endnotes

1. For references, names, and data in this section, see Guy Standing, *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay* (London: Biteback, 2017).
2. The description and characteristics outlined in this section are substantiated in Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 4<sup>th</sup> edition); idem, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). On the Chinese precariat, see Caixia Du, "The Chinese Precariat on the Internet," PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2017.
3. "Work-for-reproduction" includes activities that the precariat must undertake to sell themselves in the labor market, such as retraining, learning new tricks, brushing up a resume, and networking. Work-for-state includes all the form-filling, queuing, and other activities they must do in order to obtain meager benefits or services. This time burden imposed on the precariat has been ignored by mainstream labor economists.
4. The term "social income" refers to all sources of income—own-production, wages, non-wage enterprise benefits, occupational benefits, community benefits, state benefits, and family transfers.
5. "Returns," Norges Bank Investment Management, accessed August 3, 2018, [www.nbim.no/en/the-fund/return-on-the-fund](http://www.nbim.no/en/the-fund/return-on-the-fund).
6. Guy Standing, *Basic Income: A Guide for the Open-Minded* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). Outside the US, this is *Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen* (London: Pelican, 2017).

---

## About the Author



Guy Standing is a Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is a Fellow of the British Academy of Social Sciences; co-founder and now honorary co-president of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), an international NGO that promotes basic income; and a Council member of the Progressive Economy Forum. He is the author of such books as *The Precariat*, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay*, and the forthcoming *Reviving the Commons: A Progressive Response to Austerity*.





## Roundtable



## Bill Fletcher Jr.

Guy Standing has come to be associated with the concept of the precariat since the publication in 2011 of his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Standing has important things to say in his new essay for the Great Transition Initiative. In my reply, I want to focus on several interwoven points in which my own approach to these issues diverges from his.

First, Standing suggests that the precariat is a “new class,” and he sets it apart from the proletariat, or, more broadly conceived, from the working class. But I see no justification for this. Workers all around the world have been subject to new capital-labor relations characterized by what Standing and many others, myself included, have identified as unstable and deregulated labor relations, involving contract, part-time, temporary, outsourced, informal, non-unionized, and other forms of precarious work. Instead of prompting the formation of a “new class,” these conditions are becoming more and more generalized for all sorts of work and to all workers, including white- and blue-collar work, service work, and increasingly professional and managerial work. The precariat is part of the global working class that, as a whole, is being pushed into the conditions of precariousness. That is, the precariat is *not a class but a condition*—precariousness—imposed on increasing numbers of the global working class in the face of capitalist globalization and the transition underway for several decades now from Fordist to flexible accumulation. (In any event, Standing never actually defines what for him constitutes a class).

Second, and closely related, Standing suggests that the precariat is the potential new agent of transformation. Yet absent from his account is any discussion of what kind of a social change agent the precariat is. The notion of struggle is entirely missing. Near the end of the essay, he discusses the solution he envisions: a public fund based on taxing the commons. But how would this come about? By appealing to the powerful? By drawing up some rational blueprint? That is not how social change has ever come about. So what kind of agency should we expect from the precariat,

or like to see the precariat engage in so as to force change on the system? Here, the article seems to simply skirt over the fact that there is not much of a commons left on our planet because it has been violently appropriated by rapacious transnational corporations, that is, by the transnational capitalist class and the states whose political and military machinery have facilitated the ongoing violent appropriation and privatization of the global commons for corporate plunder. Expropriating the global commons from the global corporate class and repressive state agents and restoring it to humanity will involve mass collective struggles—struggles that, in any event, are not hypothetical but have been taking place all over the world.

Third, after having separated those precariously employed and then defining them as a class separate from the proletariat or the global working class, Standing is silent on the actual struggles being waged by workers around the world and on the transformative agency of these workers. He states that “the proletariat, the epitome of the ‘working class’ in the European sense, the ‘middle class’ in the American sense. . . . is dwindling everywhere and has lost progressive energy and direction.” Yet there are hundreds of millions of workers in China, South Africa, India, Mexico, and elsewhere who have been organizing and leading militant struggles. There is an explosion of literature on this working class and its struggles in the Global South (see, for example, Immanuel Ness’s 2015 book *Southern Insurgency*). The problem here is that Standing’s account is First World/Eurocentric, or what we could call “methodological Westernism.” But then, even in the former First World, we have militant worker struggles: witness, for instance, the struggle in the United States spearheaded by fast food workers for a \$15 per hour minimum wage.

Fourth, Standing suggests that a portion of the precariat has turned to right-wing and neo-fascist populism. While I share with him the fear of neo-fascism, I do not see any evidence that it is the precariat that forms the social base for current far-right and neo-fascist movements in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. To the contrary, it appears that the social base for such movements are professional and middle strata and better-off sectors of the working class who fear moving down into the ranks of the precariat and who identify the racially oppressed groups, immigrants, and religious minorities who disproportionately swell the ranks of the precariat as the cause of their insecurity. It is well known that in the United States the majority of support for the Trump candidacy in the 2016 presidential election came not from the lower-income and more precarious

sectors of the working class but from those in the better-off strata whose incomes averaged above \$70,000 annually. There is simply no evidence that the lower rungs of the working class that are disproportionately precariatized—and that, in Standing’s chauvinistic language, have “relatively little schooling or education in civics, or culture”—are the fodder of neo-fascist populism.

Finally, Standing does identify “rentier capitalism” as a problem. While I do not disagree with this, he does not develop any critique of the capitalist system, beyond the rentier dimensions it has acquired, as central to the story of the increasing precarious nature of work—as if curbing its rentier dimensions alone will solve the problem. The plutocracy that he mentions is not separate from the (transnational) capitalist class. It is that portion of the class that has accumulated astronomical levels of wealth. It is not just a problem of unequal distribution but the power of the transnational capitalist class, its near monopoly control over the planet’s resources, and the implacable drive of the capitalist system to generate and maximize profit over social need or any rational ordering of global society. Even if I believe it is a mistake on his part, I realize that Standing may prefer not to use language that he associates with Marxism. But I do not see how we can discuss the plight of the precariat without a systematic critique of capitalism beyond its recent rentier tendencies and—indeed—without a struggle against it.

---

## About the Author



Bill Fletcher Jr. is a labor activist and scholar. A welder by training, he has worked for several labor unions, including the AFL-CIO, where he was on the senior staff of the national office, and has served as president of TransAfrica Forum. He is a Senior Scholar with the Institute for Policy Studies and a member of the editorial board for BlackCommentator.com. He is a co-author of *The Indispensable Ally: Black Workers and the Formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1934–1941*; a co-author of *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice*; and author of *“They’re Bankrupting Us”—And Twenty Other Myths about Unions*. Fletcher writes a syndicated column and comments regularly on TV, radio, and the Internet.

---



## Nancy Folbre

Although I do not think the precariat is the transformative class, it can be and must be an important political actor in any great transition. The word itself contributes to a broader definition of class than one based purely on the capital/labor binary, and that is certainly a good thing. However, I find the discussion insufficiently attentive to forms of distributional conflict that are not based on class.

Take, for instance, citizenship. If basic incomes are implemented on the national level, huge disparities between affluent nations and poor nations will persist. Indeed, citizens of affluent nations will have even more reason than they do now to defend their national economic interests. Do the Norwegians or Alaskans really want to share their fossil fuel windfall income with the rest of the world? Perhaps we could persuade them to do so—but not if we simply ignore the issue.

For another example, consider unpaid care work. If everyone gets the same basic income, regardless of their contribution to unpaid care of families, friends, and neighbors, this will reproduce gender inequality. Of course, dependents, including children, will be assigned a basic income allowance as well. But how is this basic income allowance to be divvied up between mothers, fathers, and other caregivers? On the basis of work performed, responsibility assumed, or biological kinship? To be more specific, who will actually get the check? Again, this is not an insuperable objection. But it needs to be discussed.

Yes, we need new rules for the global economy. These rules have to go beyond the allocation of income between capital and labor.

Don't they?

---

## About the Author



Nancy Folbre is Director of the Program on Gender and Care Work at the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Senior Fellow of the Levy Institute at Bard College. Her research explores the interface between political economy and feminist theory, with a particular emphasis on the value of unpaid care work. In addition to numerous articles published in academic journals, she is the editor of *For Love and Money: Care Work in the U.S.*, and the author of *Greed, Lust, and Gender: A History of Economic Ideas*, *Valuing Children: Rethinking the Economics of the Family*, and *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values*. She has also written widely for a popular audience, including contributions to the *New York Times's* *Economix* blog, *The Nation*, and the *American Prospect*.

---



## Azfar Khan

The “world of work” is changing, and we know what its manifestations are: rising poverty, growing inequality, and heightening insecurity for an ever increasing number of people. Yet I am surprised that many of the solutions proffered to tackle these concerns continue to abide by the imposed structural boundaries. It is clearly not working.

It is true that the working class has been in a precarious state for most of the history of capitalism. However, there is also a “precarious spectrum,” and people can be located at various points on this spectrum. In the present milieu in the wake of the policy-induced trend towards concentration of wealth and income, what we are witnessing is that (1) the numbers in the spectrum are increasing in absolute and proportional terms, and (2) the class distinctions of yesteryears are becoming blurred. We appear to be moving from a more differentiated social environment to a bipolar one. We are not there yet, but it would seem that the path we are treading is leading us back to the age of feudal vassalage, i.e., one where social distinctions are intrinsically shaped by the distribution of inherited and acquired wealth. This has implications for the working classes.

The development economist of the “dependencia” school, Oswaldo Sunkel, once remarked that it is the structure of the system that produces particular outcomes and the outcomes will only change if the structure undergoes a change. What Guy Standing has done here and throughout all his work is to show us how innovative thought and transformative energy can bring about a meaningful structural change to the benefit of all—well, almost all. Certainly the so-called 1% would have to cough up some of the privileges and part of their (ill-gotten) purses. However, I am surprised that he has not made more of a mention of Universal Basic Income (UBI) in this paper, which is an intrinsic part of this innovative thought, as an enabling strategy for the transformation envisaged.

UBI begs a rethink of our existing models of social security provision, which are clearly proving very ineffective in conveying relief to the sufferings of the working classes. In the developing

world, where these standard systems of social security were imposed as imperative and intrinsic to modernization, they did not apply to the vast majority of the working populations, as many worked outside the sphere of “formal” activity for which these provisions were constructed in the first place. That situation has not changed much. In fact, one could argue that globalization, with its promotion of global supply chains, has made the situation of a majority of the workers worse. Liberalization of financial and capital markets and the privatization of social policy in economic environments where regulatory frameworks are weak have made their exploitation and misery a ubiquitous feature of “development.”

However, this need not be so. The success of the Indian UBI pilot has shown that giving people control over their lives can lead to a development of social solidarity and that providing them with a “voice” can counter the regressive forces which inhibit autonomous decision-making. It has also shown that a UBI would work better than any neoliberal social safety net and/or anti-poverty scheme in a developing country context.

On the other hand, in the developed world, social security played its part in addressing the inherent inequalities in the power structures and contributed credibly to the welfare of the working populace. But with the transition from “welfare” to “workfare” with the onset of the “Washington Consensus” directives, it has become clear that the conventional systems of public support are losing their relevance and cannot counter the trend towards growing social and economic insecurities. In fact, it could be argued—as many like Joseph Stiglitz, Tony Atkinson, and others have done—that in a socio-political environment where the control of the democratic institutions has been captured by a select few, the present social security system is actually being used to maintain the status quo. No wonder that many are looking to UBI as a rational alternative. Indeed, a couple of weeks back, I came across a [testimony](#) in the *Guardian* of a UBI recipient in Finland, who stated that although the UBI had not made him rich, it had certainly enriched his life. If that is anything to go by—and also the much acclaimed UBI experiment that was carried out in Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada, in the early/mid 1970s —then UBI is a viable and feasible solution to counter insecurity and/or poverty that grips the precariat.

A UBI will not be won without struggle, and although there are struggles being waged all over the world, I don’t see them coming together. This allows the powers that be to tolerate them and



even empathize with the individual demands, and such appeasement often leads to a further fragmentation, which impedes the development of a larger movement.

The inaction is fed by the social and economic circumstances in which many in the precariat identify themselves. Witness the [testimony](#) of a worker in McDonald's in Oregon:

The people I live with and work with and talk to work at McDonald's or as security guards or on a road crew—they are high school graduates thinking only about paying their bills and have no idea about politics in this country. If you try to engage these people about the state of the economy, just in passing, they have no idea and they don't care. They know bad things have happened to them, they know they can barely pay their bills. They are scared but they don't know why things have gotten so bad and they don't know how to find out anything. That's what scares me—they don't want to find out because they say knowing won't change anything. They say what they know doesn't matter because they can't do anything about it.

In other words, the precariat has little idea of the reality and even less knowledge of the real reasons behind economic outcomes, and they are easily swayed by a mass media which is itself manipulated.

The lynchpin of UBI is "basic security." Basic security matters because human freedom and dignity matter to all human beings. In fact, it could be reasonably argued that real freedom—which lies in the unimpeded capacity to establish one's own ends; the capacity, time, and space to determine the way in which one will pursue those ends; and the capacity to engage in the pursuit—cannot exist unless a certain level of basic security exists. If basic security can be provided, collective action is not that far away.

Leon Trotsky stated in his *History of the Russian Revolution* that "[t]he history of a revolution is for us first of all the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny." The UBI, although it does not encourage a revolution nor does it demand a forcible entrance, is first and foremost concerned with handing control to the "masses" over their own lives and moving away from the paternalism that permeates social discourse (i.e., the idea that because the precariat occupies a low social and economic position, it cannot decide for itself what is good and that decisions need to be made for them). Human beings, I believe, must be able to choose for

themselves who they are, and who they will be. This is self-definition; it is the basis of a person's sense of self, of self-worth.

---

## About the Author



Azfar Khan was with the International Labour Organization (ILO) for more than two decades, where he served as Head of Policy Research in the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW) Branch, Senior Migration Policy Advisor in the International Migration Programme, Development Economist and Deputy Director of the Programme on Socio-Economic Security, and Technical Advisor on Population and Poverty in the Development Policies Department. Previously, he was Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. He has written widely on social policy, employment and poverty, labor migration, and the interplay of demographic and macroeconomic issues. He holds a PhD in economics and development studies from the University of Sussex.



## Alexandra Köves

I highly appreciate the work of Guy Standing, and his essay is an important contribution to the discussion of how to transform society toward a more sustainable *modus operandi*. While I agree with much of what he says, I would like to present a slight spin on its logic from a Central European degrowth perspective.

A transition to a socially more just and ecologically more sustainable economy demands a completely new narrative of work itself. If we are to move away from excessive material consumption in order to decrease our environmental burden, we will have to redefine well-being, needs, and work. In such a scenario, work will no longer be equated to the more-or-less 40-hour labor that we do generally for one employer (what we now tend to label as “job security”). In a convivial world, work is something we do for our own self-development, for our family, for our community, and for society as a whole. Besides paid work, it could also include housework, care work, learning, participation in community and political decision-making, and many other tasks that we currently do not include in the concepts of work. This would entail many different forms of employment, some paid and some unpaid. This type of redefinition could support a transition to a society where work is no longer the sole means to subsistence but a source of well-being.

Together with the technological trends that we face today, these divergent forms of work would probably resemble the type of “portfolio work” that Guy Standing is describing in his essay as something unstable and highly stressful. However, it is not the form of employment that we need to demonize but the instability and the existential threat that comes with it in the current economic system. People who currently work like that may actually be the ones who will be best prepared for such a transition.

This is where basic income comes in handy. Such a redefinition of work is only possible if we provide some kind of solution for how such a transition can be supported, such as a universal basic

income (I much prefer talking about a universal basic allowance that not only includes money but also provides for many types of freedoms and capabilities). UBI can be a great tool (and never an aim in itself without new narratives) to support social transitions to a more equal and sustainable society, and it enables us to start thinking of work as something much more than paid labor.

I would like to end with one more short note. Having been raised in a socialist country, I know how badly arguments based on class structures sell in a debate on necessary transitions. Having been educated in the UK, I also know that it is a hard selling point there as well. However, in order to be able to steer societies into transitions, we need to be able to provide an agreeable narrative to many. Even if we set aside the questions of how appealing the narrative is, I also believe that such class-based arguments risk reinforcing exactly those perceived social structures that we would want to transcend in such a transition.

---

## About the Author



Alexandra Köves is a senior lecturer in the Department of Decision Sciences at the Institute of Business Economics at Corvinus University, Budapest. Prior to this, she worked within the Hungarian civil service dealing with development programs in the fields of employment policy, social integration, vocational training, and adult education. She also worked as a freelance consultant and researcher on national and international projects on development policy, employment policy, and sustainable development. She holds a PhD in ecological economics from Corvinus University.



## George Liodakis

Guy Standing's "The Precariat: Today's Transformative Class?" is a concise, well-written, and well-structured paper with several valuable insights. Though I have a great deal of respect for Standing's work, especially that concerning flexible work relations, the so-called precariat, and basic income, I have some reservations about his proposal. He reasonably puts a question mark at the end of his title, and I am very skeptical whether the "precariat," as conceptualized by Standing and others, can be today's transformative class.

To begin with, I don't think a conceptualization of the "precariat" as an emerging mass class is a fruitful idea. Theory in general is an abstraction, and a theorization of class structure is equally an abstraction. Regarding capitalism, such an abstraction reasonably disregards the internal diversity of both the working class and the capitalist class. And while it is imperative to move away from a dogmatic approach of considering the working class ahistorically as a homogeneous class, it is equally important to consider all those factors (crisis, technological developments, class tensions, and institutional changes) which may determine and perhaps historically increase this diversity of the working class. It is ontologically much safer, however, to remain within the broad categories of Marxist political economy and consider the current class structure as largely determined by existing property relations, the capitalist possession of the means of production, and the need of the proletariat to offer its wage labor to survive, than to disregard these fundamental material conditions and theorize the emergence of the "precariat" as a class determined by conjunctural conditions and institutional relations in the labor market. Despite perhaps increased working-class diversity, the unifying factors of this class remain their lack of means of production and the fact that they are all subject to an exploitation of their wage labor. I would argue that the characteristics of the precariat, which are nicely described and analyzed by Standing (unstable labor, income uncertainty, erosion of rights, etc.), essentially concern the contemporary working class and especially some of its sections. The commonality of interests, the rising consciousness, willingness

to organize, and the transformative potential that Standing attributes to the precariat concern the contemporary working class broadly conceived.

Standing has very good reasons to stress the importance and criticize the distributional implications of *rentier capitalism*. But apart from objecting to this characterization of modern capitalism, I would point out that rent is not an income deriving out of nothing. It is merely value or surplus value (produced in production) redistributed to and captured by certain sections of capital (or asset owners). The elimination of some of the excesses of rentier capitalism and the institutionalization of a basic income may be vehicles to address extreme income inequalities, but we should not forget that relations of distribution are always attendant to specific relations of production. Income redistribution or a basic income policy may not be a safe or sufficient route towards societal transformation. What we, more fundamentally, need is to revolutionize the mode of production itself. Moving beyond capitalism and establishing a common ownership of the means of production and a collective organization of production will imply a fair distribution of income, an increased social security, and a social solidarity expedient to a further transformation of society.

Standing is surely correct to emphasize the need for transformation, but his emphasis on the transformative potential of the so-called “precariat” is rather overrated and somehow misplaced, while it is not sufficiently clear in his presentation to where this transformative process should be heading. In other words, there is no clear strategic vision. We may, of course, debate the specific institutional configuration of the transitional period, but we should agree on the basic strategic goals of this transformation process. Stressing the significance of the commons indicates that Standing too has a communist vision without naming it as such. The strategic vision of communism—a historically unprecedented organization of society that will have nothing to do with the so-called “twentieth-century socialism”—should be clearly stated.

In my view, the primary agent of such a transformation cannot be other than the working class in its broad sense. The unprecedented exacerbation of socio-ecological crises makes it imperative that the working class, taking the revolutionary initiative for such a transformation, will have to start by subjecting all its past history to severe critique and contrive new innovative forms of association and organization, while setting the broad outlines of the new communist organization of society.

---

## About the Author



George Liodakis is Professor Emeritus of Political Economy at the Technical University of Crete, Greece. His research on the intersection of Marxist theory and sustainability has been published in several academic journals. He is the author of such books as *Totalitarian Capitalism and Beyond*.



## Ronaldo Munck

It is good to see Guy Standing putting forth for debate his thesis on the precariat as a potential new class agent of social transformation. I will not discuss the first section on the nature of contemporary capitalism as it is relatively uncontroversial, nor the final section on the need for a new universal basic income, which is controversial but is a subject in its own right. What I will comment on is the precariat thesis itself from the perspective of a labor activist and analyst from the Global South. I will try to make two points, namely that the concept as presently articulated is Northern-centric and that it too hastily writes off the organized labor movement. But I will also argue that it is pointing to something real.

The issues addressed in the precariat debates are not new. The term has grown in popularity as a shorthand for the changes in the experience of work in the Global North resulting from new technology and new flexible working. But for me, it does not herald the arrival of a new social class, but rather a change in the experiences of Northern employees, particularly the middle classes and their children (the millennials), that has intensified since the global financial crisis and the austerity politics that have prevailed since.

What is most noticeable in the literature around the precariat is that it is almost totally Northern-centric in its theoretical frames and its empirical reference points.<sup>1</sup>

There is a Northern sensibility at play here, it seems, harking back to Britain in the 1950s as the model of economic and political development the precariat aspires to regain.

But in fact, Fordist factory work and the welfare state were always the exception to the rule from a global perspective. “Decent work,” as called for by the ILO, has never been the norm in the postcolonial world.



Rather, super-exploitation, accumulation through dispossession, and what might be called “permanent primitive accumulation” have, by and large, prevailed. From a Southern perspective, work has always already been precarious, a basic fact which unsettles the notion that something new has been discovered. While the precariat discourse exudes nostalgia for something which has passed (the Keynesian/Fordist/welfare state), it does not speak at all to a South which never experienced welfare state capitalism.

For me, the second main weakness of the precariat concept is the complete lack of understanding of contemporary labor or of the labor movement’s organizations and strategies. The organizations of the broad working class—national and transnational trade unions, social movement and grassroots organizations, etc.—have clearly begun to revive after the long neoliberal night, and can no longer be so easily dismissed as relics of “old labor.” Bringing organized labor back in to the debate on a way forward is now crucial to an understanding of the world of work and workers in the era of globalization, especially after the crisis of 2008-09 and the clear signs since that neoliberalism has lost its hegemonic position as global development ideology. The organized labor movement simply cannot be written off in a few lines.

As a union organizer, I clearly see labor as part of the solution for our current woes, although it can be a problem at times (as I would be the first to acknowledge). But even if we are pessimistic about the prospects that trade unions might restructure and re-energize to face the new challenges to labor, we need to acknowledge that they do make a difference for those in a precarious position in the labor market.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, radical interventions in the broad labor movement, seeking the revival of social movement unionism, for example, seem to be more likely to render a positive outcome for social transformation in the era of globalization, than does trying to frighten the ruling order and liberal professionals with the specter of a monster precariat.

Finally, we might ask whether we are now seeing the emergence of a new incarnation of the global working class that can be called a global precariat which includes transnational migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> Labor conditions once characteristic of the colonial and postcolonial world have now become generalized across the globe. The very particular historical and geographic settings of the Golden Era in the North Atlantic are now seen as an anomaly. This emerging global precariat is a precursor, I would posit, of a truly global working class that is the essential corollary of global capitalist development and its now

nearly universal reach. It is not without its contradictions, between old and new working classes, women and men, North and South, but it is being unified by capitalism and by its own innate capacity to organize and resist. The global trade unions are very well aware of this emerging class of workers and are by no means irrelevant today, so long as they rediscover their roots as a social movement. Their own future depends on it, but so also does that of the global precariat which is only a "dangerous class" for capital and not for other workers.

## Endnotes

1. See Ronaldo Munck, "The Precariat: A View from the South," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (June 2013): 747–762, [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263724631\\_The\\_Precariat\\_A\\_View\\_from\\_the\\_South](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263724631_The_Precariat_A_View_from_the_South).
2. See for example the role of the unions in McStrike movement: Rajeev Syal, "'McStrike': McDonald's Workers Walk out over Zero-Hours Contracts," *Guardian*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/may/01/mcstrike-mcdonalds-workers-walk-out-over-zero-hours-contracts>.
3. Ronaldo Munck and Carl-Ulrik Schierup, "The Migration Crisis: What Can Labor Unions Do," *OUP Blog*, January 18, 2016, <https://blog.oup.com/2016/01/migration-global-trade-unions/>.

---

## About the Author



Ronaldo Munck is Head of Civic Engagement at Dublin City University, where his role includes engaging the university's teaching and research with the needs of the community. He is also a Visiting Professor of International Development at the University of Liverpool and the University of Buenos Aires. He has written widely on his native Latin America, most recently *Rethinking Latin America*, and, as an active trade unionist as well as scholar, on the impact of globalization on labor. He was a lead author for the International Panel on Social Progress report *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century*. His current project focuses on the prospects for the new social movements in Latin America.



## William I. Robinson

Guy Standing has come to be associated with the concept of the precariat since the publication in 2011 of his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Standing has important things to say in his new essay for the Great Transition Initiative. In my reply, I want to focus on several interwoven points in which my own approach to these issues diverges from his.

First, Standing suggests that the precariat is a “new class,” and he sets it apart from the proletariat, or, more broadly conceived, from the working class. But I see no justification for this. Workers all around the world have been subject to new capital-labor relations characterized by what Standing and many others, myself included, have identified as unstable and deregulated labor relations, involving contract, part-time, temporary, outsourced, informal, non-unionized, and other forms of precarious work. Instead of prompting the formation of a “new class,” these conditions are becoming more and more generalized for all sorts of work and to all workers, including white- and blue-collar work, service work, and increasingly professional and managerial work. The precariat is part of the global working class that, as a whole, is being pushed into the conditions of precariousness. That is, the precariat is *not a class but a condition—precariousness*—imposed on increasing numbers of the global working class in the face of capitalist globalization and the transition underway for several decades now from Fordist to flexible accumulation. (In any event, Standing never actually defines what for him constitutes a class).

Second, and closely related, Standing suggests that the precariat is the potential new agent of transformation. Yet absent from his account is any discussion of what kind of a social change agent the precariat is. The notion of struggle is entirely missing. Near the end of the essay, he discusses the solution he envisions: a public fund based on taxing the commons. But how would this come about? By appealing to the powerful? By drawing up some rational blueprint? That is not how social change has ever come about. So what kind of agency should we expect from the precariat, or like

to see the precariat engage in so as to force change on the system? Here, the article seems to simply skirt over the fact that there is not much of a commons left on our planet because it has been violently appropriated by rapacious transnational corporations, that is, by the transnational capitalist class and the states whose political and military machinery have facilitated the ongoing violent appropriation and privatization of the global commons for corporate plunder. Expropriating the global commons from the global corporate class and repressive state agents and restoring it to humanity will involve mass collective struggles—struggles that, in any event, are not hypothetical but have been taking place all over the world.

Third, after having separated those precariously employed and then defining them as a class separate from the proletariat or the global working class, Standing is silent on the actual struggles being waged by workers around the world and on the transformative agency of these workers. He states that “the proletariat, the epitome of the ‘working class’ in the European sense, the ‘middle class’ in the American sense...is dwindling everywhere and has lost progressive energy and direction.” Yet there are hundreds of millions of workers in China, South Africa, India, Mexico, and elsewhere who have been organizing and leading militant struggles. There is an explosion of literature on this working class and its struggles in the Global South (see, for example, Immanuel Ness’s 2015 book *Southern Insurgency*). The problem here is that Standing’s account is First World/Eurocentric, or what we could call “methodological Westernism.” But then, even in the former First World, we have militant worker struggles: witness, for instance, the struggle in the United States spearheaded by fast food workers for a \$15 per hour minimum wage.

Fourth, Standing suggests that a portion of the precariat has turned to right-wing and neo-fascist populism. While I share with him the fear of neo-fascism, I do not see any evidence that it is the precariat that forms the social base for current far-right and neo-fascist movements in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. To the contrary, it appears that the social base for such movements are professional and middle strata and better-off sectors of the working class who fear moving down into the ranks of the precariat and who identify the racially oppressed groups, immigrants, and religious minorities who disproportionately swell the ranks of the precariat as the cause of their insecurity. It is well known that in the United States the majority of support for the Trump candidacy in the 2016 presidential election came not from the lower-income and more precarious sectors of the working

class but from those in the better-off strata whose incomes averaged above \$70,000 annually. There is simply no evidence that the lower rungs of the working class that are disproportionately precariatized—and that, in Standing’s chauvinistic language, have “relatively little schooling or education in civics, or culture”—are the fodder of neo-fascist populism.

Finally, Standing does identify “rentier capitalism” as a problem. While I do not disagree with this, he does not develop any critique of the capitalist system, beyond the rentier dimensions it has acquired, as central to the story of the increasing precarious nature of work—as if curbing its rentier dimensions alone will solve the problem. The plutocracy that he mentions is not separate from the (transnational) capitalist class. It is that portion of the class that has accumulated astronomical levels of wealth. It is not just a problem of unequal distribution but the power of the transnational capitalist class, its near monopoly control over the planet’s resources, and the implacable drive of the capitalist system to generate and maximize profit over social need or any rational ordering of global society. Even if I believe it is a mistake on his part, I realize that Standing may prefer not to use language that he associates with Marxism. But I do not see how we can discuss the plight of the precariat without a systematic critique of capitalism beyond its recent rentier tendencies and—indeed—without a struggle against it.

---

## About the Author



William I. Robinson is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Global and International Studies, and Latin American and Iberian Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His books include *The Global Police State*, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, *Latin America and Global Capitalism*, and *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*. Previously, he was an investigative journalist in Central America and has lectured around the world on the global economy, international politics, and contemporary world affairs. He is active in several social justice movements, including immigrant rights in the United States and justice for Palestine. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico.



## Pritam Singh

My overall impression after reading Guy Standing's new essay is that he has provided an excellent and innovative analysis of some key dimensions of modern capitalism with a focus on the volatility of work environment. However, by the end of the article, I found that the political message was not transformative enough, and that there was a disjunction, one could say, between the analysis and the policy prescription.

Granted, a basic universal income can still be part of a transformative process, but to stop there is merely another kind of Keynesianism, a strategy and a vision of reforms within capitalism to make it more flexible and workable. If capitalism has reduced human beings to this precarious situation, there has to be a bold vision that capitalism has to be abolished.

In the era of global climate change and decreasing biodiversity, the bold vision of an alternative to capitalism in the form of ecosocialism has to be a central part of any effort to touch the imagination of those who are suffering under capitalism and are opposed to capitalism. This vision must transcend the trap of remaining in the bounds of income debates. One has to question human relations to nature, especially to other species. If the scheme of universal basic income is accepted and implemented all over the world but human relations to nature and other non-human species remain the same, it will have solved none of our problems, not even ending inequality between human beings.

To conclude, a universal basic income is a good idea that deserves welcome but needs to be taken forward to really make it transformative, which, I trust, is the motivation behind Guy's project.

---

## About the Author



Pritam Singh is a Visiting Scholar at Wolfson College, Oxford, and Emeritus Professor at Oxford Brookes University. He has served as a Research Associate at the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford, as well as a Visiting Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Moscow State University, and Federal University of Uberlandia. His work currently focuses on the sustainability implications of the spatial shift in global capitalism, and the dynamics of Indian capitalism, with an emphasis on decentralization and human rights. His books include *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy and Economy, Culture and Human Rights: Turbulence in Punjab, India and Beyond*. He holds a PhD in economics from the University of Oxford.

---



## Eva-Maria Swidler

It seems that there are many of us out there moving along similar paths of thinking, and this gives me hope. In particular, and in agreement with some of the other commenters, I argued, in a piece this past spring, that the experiences of those workers in the core countries who are newly precarious are falling into line with what has been the ongoing experience of most workers in the world, whether those workers are found in the so-called informal sector, peasants, women doing unpaid labor, pieceworkers, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

This unity of experience actually opens up greater possibilities for solidarity and unity of action, if we can name and foreground the commonalities among all these exploited workers, who at this point are conceived of as differently exploited, or even as merely “oppressed,” rather than as exploited. Exposing and naming that unity of experience and exploitation is, I believe, our job right now as intellectuals and activists. A generalization of that insight of the unity of experience these workers share is the precondition for collective action.

Additionally, precarity itself as a facet of labor’s condition opens possibilities, as capitalists have at least partially retreated from organizing the labor process itself. To quote myself talking about formerly waged workers in the core countries:

As relations of labor return in our current time to slightly novel versions of the older piece work and putting out systems, now just using labels such as consulting, contracting, just-in-time, gigs, and a ‘results-only work environment’, once again the work day and the work process are under greater worker control. Only under a wage labor system, where the capitalist measures and owns the time of the worker, does the capitalist exert maximal control over the design and carrying-out of labor. In relations of production where the capitalist has given up direct control over worker time, he (as it is usually a man) simultaneously gives up control over the work process. Creative labor activists can certainly think of many ways in which greater responsibility for the production process may



be translated into openings for struggle, starting perhaps with learning from the troubles that workers in older workplaces created for capitalism—troubles which inspired the drive towards the factory, the wage, and then the assembly line in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, lessons from history can be useful if we conceptualize our current moment as having parallels with the pre-wage, pre-factory world of labor. Most commenters seemed to agree that the precarious forms of labor that we see today are widespread and not actually new, but rather revivals of either a kind of labor relation that was historically common, in the case of industrialized countries, or a kind of labor relation that has always been present in the capitalist era, in the case of the global South. How did workers in the older forms of precarious labor resist it? How do workers in the global South and here today push back against precarity, build solidarity in spite of it, construct independent subsistence outside of it?

Obviously these forms of resistance and rebellion have not been fully successful, or the modern world would not be what it is, but to me, the first order of business should be to learn from those who live or lived under these conditions so that we can apply, amplify, forward, support, etc., their strategies, and perhaps (with a lot of work and wisdom) we'll be able to supplement their strategies as well. Rather than wondering as outsiders whether these workers will bring about change, our task is to learn from them and then work with them to bring about that change they (and we) want to see.

Creating agendas for change that do not draw on the experience and power of what is probably the majority of people on the planet (precarious workers) is not going to yield much, but it takes humility to see that we need to learn from them, past and present, before we can act effectively.

## Endnotes

1. Eva Swidler, "Invisible Exploitation: How Capital Extracts Value Beyond Wage Labor," *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (March 2018), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/2018/03/01/invisible-exploitation/>.

2. Eva Swidler, "Marxism Beyond the Economy and Exploitation Beyond the Wage," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (March 2017): 1-18, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321271653\\_Marxism\\_Beyond\\_the\\_Economy\\_and\\_Exploitation\\_Beyond\\_the\\_Wage](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321271653_Marxism_Beyond_the_Economy_and_Exploitation_Beyond_the_Wage).

---

## About the Author



Eva-Maria Swidler is a professor of liberal arts at Goddard College and the Curtis Institute of Music. Her research and writing have focused on historiography, radical pedagogy, political economy, and labor studies, and she writes frequently on the effects of precarity and adjunct labor in the academy. She started her adult working life with two decades in clinical practice as an RN and nurse-midwife, returning later to academia to receive a PhD in history at Temple University. Her dissertation considered the history of agriculture and environment in the US Southwest from the point of view of a world historian.

---



## Alison Tate and Evelyn Astor

Guy Standing's paper on the rise of the precariat sets out many serious challenges that workers in the world today are struggling with.

Indeed, we have observed over the last decades a falling wage share, with millions of workers in supply chains and elsewhere struggling even to survive—despite the fact that wealth has increased dramatically over the past decades and productivity is at the highest point in history. Labor markets are increasingly precarious, with agency work, temporary work, platform work, and dependent self-employment all becoming the new norm.

At the same time, supply chains have emerged as the dominant model of global production. International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) research shows that more than 60 percent of global trade is dependent on contracts in supply chains, and up to 94 percent of the workers in the supply chains of major multinational enterprises comprise a hidden workforce.<sup>1</sup> As Standing rightly points out in his paper, this model has allowed companies to compete across the globe on the basis of low wages, poor working conditions, and low levels of unionization. Moreover, the attenuated chain of responsibility has led to vast violations of national and internationally agreed labor standards.

The current model of economic growth is not allowing for a fair distribution of income or wealth. Rather, it has fueled the corporate greed and has torn apart the social contract. The results of ITUC's recent global poll show that as many as 80 percent of all global respondents believe the economic system favors the wealthy, rather than being fair to most people. 85 percent believe that it's time to rewrite the rules of the global economy.<sup>2</sup>

Rewriting the rules requires a change in current public policy. Governments need to strengthen legislation to rein in predatory work practices and attacks on freedom of association and collective

bargaining. Instead, reforms in many countries have been undertaken in recent years to weaken labor market institutions, reduce employment protection, and “flexibilize” the labor market. Very often, such reforms have been heavily promoted by international organizations and financial institutions. All of this has led to reduced possibilities for workers and their unions to negotiate fair wages and other working conditions. In parallel with workers’ increased income insecurity from work, social protection systems remain grossly inadequate, with over 70% of the world’s population lacking any or adequate social protection.

But is a basic income the solution? Standing and many others seem to think so. Unions around the world see some opportunities in this proposal, but also many risks. While the global labor movement has yet to come up with a firm position on the proposal of a basic income, the ITUC rejects the idea that increasing unemployment and precarious employment are inevitable, and that only a basic income would be able to effectively address these problems.<sup>3</sup>

Unions will continue to fight for and negotiate a better future of work. We are calling for decent work conditions, including through adequate minimum living wages, fundamental occupational health and safety, reasonable working hours, job security, and respect for freedom of association and collective bargaining—in line with international labor standards. Adequate, comprehensive social protection systems, in line with ILO Convention 102 on Social Security and Recommendation 202 on Social Protection Floors, need to be put in place.

## Endnotes

1. International Trade Union Confederation, *Scandal: Inside the Global Supply Chains of 50 Top Companies* (Brussels: ITUC, 2016), [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/pdffrontlines\\_scandal\\_en-2.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/pdffrontlines_scandal_en-2.pdf).

2. International Trade Union Confederation, *International Trade Union Confederation 2017 Global Poll* (Brussels: ITUC, 2016), [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/global\\_poll\\_en\\_print.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/global_poll_en_print.pdf).

3. The ITUC has just published a short policy brief that explores the pros and cons of the issue around basic income in more detail. You may find it on our website here ([www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/universal\\_basic\\_income.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/universal_basic_income.pdf)).

---

## About the Authors



Alison Tate is the Director of Economic and Social Policy of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), a body representing 207 million workers in 165 countries. Her policy work spans such areas as international trade and investment, social policy, and sustainable development. In her role at ITUC, she represents unions in bodies including the United Nations, the G20, and international financial institutions, and a Commissioner of the Financial Sector Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.



Evelyn Astor is a policy officer in the Economic and Social Policy Department of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), where she focuses on fair wages, access to decent work and social protection. Prior to joining the ITUC in 2017, she worked at the European Commission on issues around social protection and gender equality in the labor market. She holds an MSc in Social Policy from the London School of Economics and a degree in public policy and human rights from New York University.



## Author's Response



## Response to Comments

Thanks are due to all who commented on my essay. This response will focus on a few key arguments and recurring themes.

I want to begin by rebutting Ronaldo Munck's claim (backed by William Robinson and Bill Fletcher) that the precariat is a "Northern-centric" concept, inapplicable to the "Global South." I first conceptualized the precariat while implementing a "labor flexibility" survey in 3,000 industrial enterprises in Malaysia in the 1980s, and then refined it in similar surveys in the Philippines, Indonesia, and what was then Bombay. I refined the ideas while director of the International Labour Organization's technical work in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and conducted the first analysis of a national precariat in South Africa, where I was research director for Nelson Mandela's Labour Market Commission.

Subsequently, I had the privilege of working for over a decade with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a union of two million women outworkers (i.e., employees who perform their work at home or at a place not normally considered a business premise), with whom I implemented three basic income pilots covering thousands of people. But perhaps most revealing is the recent research on the precariat in China (cited in footnote 2 of my essay).

Based on my work and research on the "Global South" over thirty years, I believe the charge that the precariat concept is "Northern-centric" reflects a superficial reading of the argument. Obviously, the precariat and the emerging global class structure are more pronounced in some countries. That has always been the case with class structures.

Nor is the policy proposal I advance—a universal basic income—a Northern-centric solution, as Azfar Khan reminds us. As it happens, I have been involved in basic income pilots covering thousands of people in India and Namibia, besides analyzing moves in that direction in other

developing countries. The evaluation surveys of the Indian pilot showed a series of transformative changes—improvements in nutrition, health and schooling, better sanitation, emancipatory breakthroughs for women and the disabled, greater cooperative work activity, and reductions in the power of landlords and moneylenders. We found similar effects in Namibia.

Another claim by Munck, supported by others, is that the precariat concept I develop shows a “complete lack of understanding of contemporary labour or of the labour movement’s organisations and strategies.” To the contrary, my research and experience as a union member for most of my life have led me to view worker organizations as vital. I have addressed numerous unions around the world, and worked with many, including the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and SEWA. At the same time, we must avoid a kind of “laborism” that idealizing unions. Consider the following examples that reveal conventional labor’s inherent failings.

First, for a decade, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) refused to accept SEWA as a member, blocking it as a worker body in the ILO, even though it was fighting for the rights of women outworkers and had two million members. I acted as an intermediary, as SEWA activists struggled against excommunication and the sexist bias of the unions that argued that SEWA did not represent “employees.”

Second, I recall with distaste being invited to discuss the new unions in Eastern Europe with the then-president of the AFL-CIO. Between expletives, his message was that I should stop working with them, although I knew them to be individuals who had bravely stood against tyranny and for worker rights. The leader of the world’s biggest union confederation showed lack of class solidarity, to put it mildly.

A third example occurred when I addressed an international group of union leaders at a study retreat. I posed the question, “Why have union leaders been among the most vehement opponents of a guaranteed, universal basic income? After all, it is about giving everybody basic security.” Although the chair tried to prevent discussion, one leader said, “I think it is because we think that if people have income security they will not join unions.” I pointed out the immorality of that sentiment, adding, “Fortunately the premise is wrong. People who are chronically insecure are less



likely to join a collective body, for fear of retribution. If they have basic security, they are more likely to have the courage to fight for rights.”

Fourth, recently a decision had to be made on building a third runway at Heathrow that will mean planes flying over low-income neighborhoods in East London. Nobody denies that it will intensify noise and air pollution, endangering lives and child development. But one group lobbied feverishly (and, sadly, successfully) for the runway on the grounds that it would create jobs. Yes, the unions. Other examples abound of how unions have shown disregard for environmental degradation. Jobs or the environment? No contest.

How do we move past such laborism? My essay advocates a guaranteed basic income for all, but that, of course, is not itself a sufficient solution, as several commenters pointed out. For successful transformation, two meta-securities are needed: basic income (for without economic security, nobody can feel in control of their lives) and strong collective organizations to represent our interests, for without these we are always vulnerable). We need a synthesis of the best elements of the craft guilds that industrial unions helped to destroy and the best elements of trades unions. Moreover, to reach the precariat, unions should focus on “collaborative bargaining” not just “collective bargaining.”

In developing my book *A Precariat Charter*, one point crystallized regarding how the precariat could be a vanguard for social change (which William Robinson erroneously claims is absent in my analysis). In exaggerated form, it is this: the proletariat’s primary antagonist is the employer, the boss, the capitalist; the precariat’s primary (but not only) antagonist is the state. That became clear in Occupy movements and in the further evolution of precariat movements. All transformations begin with recognition of common identity and interest, and with understanding the nature of the enemy. This is a necessary first step on the road to transformation. The precariat knows that the immoral regulatory practices of social, economic, and labor market policy are directed at it, and that this is where the morally weak underbelly should be critiqued.

Robinson’s comment that workers around the world have been subject to what “Standing and many others, myself included, have identified as unstable and deregulated labor relations” shows a lack of understanding of my analysis. One of my central claims, right or wrong, is that there has been no “deregulation.” Indeed, a reasonable hypothesis is that, in the evolution of capitalism, never

has state regulation been more comprehensive or directive. And this is directed primarily at the precariat.

To George Lioudakis's comment, while I am unsure how I have "a communist vision," I strongly disagree that "relations of distribution are always attendant to specific relations of production." It is a key to understanding the different material interests and tensions between the salariat, proletariat, and precariat that while all three classes experience wage labor as part of their "relations of production," they have very different structures of social income. The first group receives a large and growing part of their income from capital, the middle group a rising proportion from the state, and the precariat none of the former and a shrinking share of the latter. This is why it is vital to define class by reference to all three dimensions—relations of production, relations of distribution, and relations to the state.

Alison Tate and Evelyn Astor, who are both with for the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), note that the ITUC "rejects the idea that increasing unemployment and precarious employment are inevitable." If they mean to associate the idea of inevitability with me, they are mistaken. In fact, I reject the term "precarious employment" and think that, with the dominant state regulatory policy, low open unemployment is more likely than high. Concealing unemployment has been a feature of social democratic support for workfare, as exemplified by Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare act, the Hartz IV reforms made by the Social Democrats in Germany, and Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's regime of tax credits and means-tested benefits in the UK.

It is revealing that the labor movement in general has done very little to challenge workfare, but has persisted in promoting laborist social security. Tate and Astor advocate support for ILO Convention 102 on Social Security, but, as I have underscored elsewhere, that Convention may be the most sexist and laborist of all labor Conventions. Passed in 1952, it defines the "standard beneficiary" as "a man with wife and two children," further clarifying that "the term 'wife' means a wife who is maintained by her husband." The fact that representatives of the international "labor movement" support such paternalistic policy is sad. The precariat would be deeply disadvantaged if Convention 102 were put into effect.

Moreover, in clarifying what the precariat is, it is important to distinguish this new class from the so-called “informal sector,” a term I reject. This commonly used phrase mixes up petty production, a labor reserve, and a lumpen “stagnant” population, allowing some observers to depict it as the focus for development, others as a reflection of developmental failure. The precariat does not correspond to any of that. It is the core “active” feature of global capitalism, providing “flexible” labor. But for critics of existing capitalism, the beauty of it is that it is a dangerous class, and it is this which is overlooked by leftish critics who mistake the meaning by focusing only on the downside. It is dangerous precisely because it is not the proletariat and not a “proto-proletariat” or a lumpen category.

Critics also often presume I am writing about “precarious labor,” another term I have come to detest, and that the precariat is just a bunch of victims, wallowing in insecurity. But I tried to convey the dialectical character in the essay, building on my previous work, stressing why the growing part of the precariat is emancipatory. The proletariat and their laborist representatives want decent labor. But the beauty of the precariat is that its growing part does not suffer from the false consciousness that decent labor is the answer to a sensible existential question. Its progressive part wants liberation from labor. This is why it is so important to differentiate between work from labor and leisure from recreation.

I will end this response by pleading for a new conceptual vocabulary. Too many critics of the precariat and the proposed class typology seem determined to stick with nineteenth-century words and notions. Millions of people with secondary and tertiary schooling are surely puzzled or alienated by being told they are in “the working class.” And to be told there is a united working class, or that it soon could exist, strikes many as risible.